



William Faulkner in 1954, photographed by Carl Van Vechten

## MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH HISTORY

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



When I applied to graduate from college some three decades ago, a campus administrator reviewed my transcript and

revealed a surprise. Although a liberal arts major with a declared emphasis in journalism, I was, it turned out, just one course shy of a double major in history.

It wasn't something I had set out to do. But over four years, when given the choice of an elective, I had, it seemed, reflexively gravitated toward a study of the past. Leaving the registrar's office, I began to wonder what tricks of circumstance had shaped my fascination with history, a discipline related to hindsight.

Growing up in the South, I was sure, had something to do with it. I was raised in Louisiana, where extended families tend to stay put in the same place, accumulating too many ancestral memories to store in the attic. They spill down into the familiar rooms of daily life, flavoring household conversation.

"Your Aunt Claire's birthday is today," my grandmother might brightly remark

*There are lots of practical reasons to love history.*

*But the pure pleasure of story can be a big draw, too.*

one morning about a relative who had died long ago when I was a baby. It would not have occurred to my grandmother that birthdays were strictly for the living. The departed, through the magic of recollection, could be summoned back to the breakfast table as casually as a genie rubbed from a lamp.

It's probably no accident that William Faulkner, who offered perhaps the most famous formulation on the persistence of the past, was a Southerner. "The past is never dead," he memorably remarked. "It's not even past."

My birth order as the youngest of six children no doubt influenced my interest in the past, too. As the runt of the family litter, I learned to look toward precedent as a way to grasp what might lie ahead. If I wanted to know what high school or college might be like, siblings who had gone ahead of me helped make the transitions less strange. The presence of older brothers and sisters in my life underlined an abiding truth: To better understand the present and plan the future, consider the experiences of those who have come before.

There was another, less practical reason to visit the past – namely, the pure pleasure of story. David McCullough, one of our liveliest writers of history, has said that the past is interesting because things didn't have to turn out the way they did; they might have gone the other way.

It's why in this winter, as in so many others, I'll often spend frosty evenings with a book of history on my lap, anxious to see what happens next.

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**DANNY HEITMAN**, editor of *Forum*, often writes about the arts and culture for national publications, including *Humanities* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal*.